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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ZATLERS' VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Ambassador Charles W. Larson, Jr. Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Latvian President Valdis Zatlers makes his first visit to Washington April 23 - 25 significantly stronger in his job than when he started, but still not the dominant figure in Latvian politics that his predecessor was. Given the strong constitutional limitations on his role, this is only natural. Over his first nine months in office he has begun to develop his own voice. It is a voice that is trans-Atlantic in orientation, supportive of freedom and democracy, skeptical of Russia, and anti-corruption. He has been very helpful on key issues for us, often behind the scenes, including the reappointment of the intelligence chief and maintaining the planned deployment of a Latvian OMLT to Afghanistan. The visit will boost Zatlers' legitimacy at home and contribute to his further growth in these areas. In his meetings he will focus on Latvia's desire to join visa waiver, concerns about Russia (including energy security), support for democracy in the former Soviet sphere, and NATO issues such as Latvian contributions to ISAF and the future of the CFE arrangements. Our message to Zatlers should be that in the absence of significant executive powers, his greatest asset is his voice and that he can serve as the moral compass of the nation. Even if he cannot write policy, he can help shape it. With continued tension likely among parliamentary parties, Zatlers is going to be the constant in Latvian politics through 2011. This visit is an opportunity to ensure that he keeps Latvia on the path of advancing our mutual interests and common values. End summary.

¶2. (U) Latvian President Valdis Zatlers, accompanied by Defense Minister Vinets Veldre and MFA state secretary Normans Penke, will travel to Washington April 22 - 25 for meetings with the Vice President, Secretary Rice and other U.S. officials. He also will have meetings on Capitol Hill. He will then continue on to the annual congress of Latvian-Americans, being held this year in Cleveland April 25 - 27.

¶3. (C) Valdis Zatlers came to the presidency in July 2007 in a weak position. First of all, no president could immediately fill the shoes of Vaira Vike-Freiberga who left office as the dominant figure in Latvian politics. Second, the political naivete of Zatlers combined with the ethical baggage for accepting cash "gifts" from patients when a physician (common practice in Latvia) created a public perception that he wasn't up to the job. This was not helped when it was revealed that members of the ruling coalition had met at the Riga zoo to decide on Zatlers as the coalition's choice for President. Initial relations with the media were also rough, which did not improve his public image.

¶4. (C) In the more than nine months that he has been in office, though, he has worked to change that image and has begun to have some success in doing so. Domestically, his first opportunity came with the public expressions of

frustrations with the Kalvitis government last fall over the attempted removal of the anti-corruption chief. When nearly 10,000 people gathered in a downtown Riga square last November, on a cold and snowy day, to demand Kalvitis' resignation and the dismissal of parliament in Latvia's largest political protest since the fall of the Soviet Union, the President watched the proceedings on television. As he saw the proceedings unfold, he decided that he would go down and address the crowd. He delivered a short, extemporaneous address, and while the lack of preparations meant he did not deliver a stem winder, he got a positive response for showing up and speaking to the people's angst.

15. (C/NF) As the crisis deepened, Kalvitis was forced to step down. Those close to Kalvitis told us that he considered trying to stay on, but that Zatlers told him that if he did, the President would go public in urging Kalvitis to step down. When Kalvitis announced his intention to resign, Zatlers moved quickly to welcome the move and create a situation in which Kalvitis could not rethink his position. Zatlers then attempted to manage the succession in a way that would provide maximum transparency in selection of a new PM, one of the few powers reserved solely to the President. He encouraged public debates among the candidates, publication of platforms, and met with each candidate to discuss the potential shape of their government and key priorities. He got high marks for running such an open process, although the politically savvy of Latvia recognized that he actually limited his freedom of choice by insisting on such an open process. When Zatlers realized that the parties were playing him a bit in the process, he shook things up by "consulting" with several individuals from outside politics who had been rumored as potential PM's with no party affiliation. Of the choices nominated by the parties in the governing coalition,

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Ivars Godmanis, whom Zatlers invited to form government, was the best choice.

16. (C) Zatlers' public image has also been helped by his activities in the area of foreign affairs. This is how Vike-Freiberga built her internal reputation as well because the Latvian constitution does not constrain presidents in this area as much it does in domestic politics. One of his earliest foreign trips was to Afghanistan to see the Latvian troops there and better understand how Latvia can help. When Shakashvili was reelected in Georgia, Zatlers was standing almost directly behind him in shots from the inaugural, which made many Latvians proud to see such a visible symbol of support for a country in transition. He also earned high marks for going to Vilnius for the 90th anniversary of Lithuanian independence and speaking a few words of Lithuanian. And while he would no doubt be very excited to be the first Latvian President to pay a bilateral visit to Moscow, he will insist on a substantive agenda for the visit.

17. (C) Zatlers stumbled a bit when a newspaper interview with a Belarusian newspaper seemed to suggest that he thought conditions in Cuba were pretty good and that he might visit Belarus, but it is now clear to us that he was attempting to be sarcastic, something which did not convey across a language and cultural barrier with the Belarusian journalist. Since then, he has worked in his public and press comments to speak more clearly on his support for freedom and democracy and we are told that he worked on editing his interventions at the Bucharest summit on these topics to convey clearly his support for them.

18. (C/NF) Behind the scenes, Zatlers is playing a helpful and important role. His trip to Afghanistan convinced him that ISAF must succeed and Latvia must do its part. When DefMin Veldre, new to the job, suggested in the press that Latvia might not proceed with deployment of an OMLT, Zatlers very publicly said that Latvia would fulfill its commitments to the alliance. In private, advisors to both Zatlers and Veldre tell us, the President was even more direct with the

minister, telling him that it was irresponsible to cast doubt on Latvia's reliability as a NATO partner. The deployment is back on track. Zatlers was also very helpful in securing the reappointment of the intelligence chief, who is essential for advancing our interests in information security and in promoting the rule of law in Latvia.

¶9. (C) In our interactions, we have found Zatlers to be smart and engaged. Members of his staff tell us that he has the ability, likely born of his medical training, to absorb, retain, and recall a large amount of information. In meetings, he is much better able than when he started to articulate his priorities and to ask insightful questions. And you can always tell that he is listening to and processing the responses you give him.

What's on his mind

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¶10. (C) Zatlers will come to Washington wanting to talk about Latvia's desire to join visa waiver, concerns about Russia (including energy security), support for democracy in the former Soviet sphere, and NATO issues such as Latvian contributions to ISAF and the future of the CFE arrangements.

Visa waiver is the most important foreign policy issue for the average Latvian, so he is obliged to raise it. With the signing by Secretary Chertoff of the visa waiver MOU in March and the recent agreement on the text of an agreement on terrorist information sharing, we are making good progress. Zatlers will thank the administration for its support for Latvian admission to the program and offer assurances that Latvia is committed to doing what it needs to do to meet all the criteria. We should stress the importance we attach to the security requirements for admission to the program as a useful reminder of the significance of this issue. The Latvian Embassy is attempting to arrange meetings with members of Congress skeptical of the program.

¶11. (C) Zatlers will want to follow up on the Bucharest decisions on Georgia and Ukraine and seek our thoughts on how best to ensure a rapid decision to admit them to MAP. Latvia has offered important assistance to both countries, including helping Georgia organize its upcoming parliamentary elections and bringing Ukrainian journalists, including Russian speaking ones, to Latvia to see the benefits of NATO membership. We should thank him for Latvia's efforts on those countries and support for Moldova, but also encourage him to play a more active role in promoting democracy in Belarus, where Latvia has not been as aggressively engaged as some of the other states in the region.

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¶12. (C/NF) Russia is never far from the mind of any Latvian official, but it's an area where Zatlers has shown particular interest and concerns, as evidenced by his tough, off the cuff remarks to Putin at the NRC in Bucharest. In meetings with us and with visiting US officials he has expressed concern about possible Russian active measures in Latvia and asked us to arrange a briefing for him on how Russia employs such tactics. At the same time, Zatlers has supported the development of more normal bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia, but not at any price. He does hope to visit Moscow later this year, which would make him the first Latvian president to pay a bilateral visit there. However, he and the GOL are insisting that a substantive agenda for the visit be developed first. Zatlers has also made an effort to reach out to Latvia's ethnic Russian population more extensively than did his predecessor. One issue that particularly concerns Zatlers is energy security. Latvia is wholly dependent on Russia for gas and, with the upcoming closure of the Ignalina nuclear plant in Lithuania, will become increasingly dependent on Russia for electricity. Zatlers will want to compare notes on how Russia under Medvedev-Putin will behave and hear our ideas on how we can help promote sensible solutions on energy security.

¶13. (C) On NATO issues, Zatlers is an important ally within the GOL and it is no accident that DefMin Veldre will accompany him on this visit. While always a supporter of NATO, Zatlers, since coming to office, has come to grasp in a much more concrete way the practical value to Latvia of NATO membership and the obligations of membership. While thanking him for Latvia's current contributions to ISAF and upcoming deployment of an OMLT, we should gently push him to explore whether Latvia might consider additional deployments in future. We have previously set out the operational and financial barriers to this, which still exist, but it is still worth mentioning. Zatlers may also raise Latvia's continued concern that the ongoing stalemate with Russia over the CFE treaty and the possibility that Latvia will be asked to make concessions, which Russia will pocket without taking reciprocal action. He is likely to acknowledge the positive light in which they view the EUCOM/DOD-led consultations with the Baltics on security issues and seek a reaffirmation that any discussions with the Russians on CFE will be based on agreed NATO positions and that that we will not talk about the Baltics without at least consulting them first ("nothing about you without you").

¶14. (C/NF) Washington interlocutors should also raise the importance of transparency and the rule of law. Corruption remains a serious issue in Latvia and power is far too concentrated in the hands of a few. We should be concerned because the country that stands to benefit from this is Russia, which has no qualms about its companies operating in such an environment and uses those economic/commercial ties for political influence. Many Latvian leaders, naively and wrongly in our view, believe that they can manage this in the same way that the played Moscow in Soviet days. Zatlers needs to hear from senior US officials that we attach importance to fighting corruption and believe he is in a position to influence politics in Latvia for the better. The Latvian Ambassador to the US told us that when Secretary Chertoff made similar points to Zatlers on his visit here last month, the president came away "energized" on fighting corruption. We also observe that, based on the carping that he was selected to do the bidding of the oligarchs, Zatlers recognizes that taking a firm stand against corruption is an important indicator of his independence.

¶15. (C) While in the U.S., Zatlers will be meeting with representatives of Jewish groups to whom the Latvian Jewish community has entrusted the task of reviving the stalled negotiations on restitution of the small number of remaining communal properties and the heirless private property seized in WWII. A statement of USG support for these efforts would help push the President to engage on this issue and push the cabinet for action.

¶16. (C) We believe that this visit offers an opportunity to bolster a relatively new leader who is still finding his way but whose basic policy inclinations are helpful in many areas and who desires a close and effective partnership with the United States.  
LARSON